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ABSTRACT

As a step toward writing a master's thesis in psychology, the connection between rhythm circles and psychotherapeutic process was explored. Arthur Hull, who experienced and preached about the healing power of rhythm for many years, was interviewed. This article recorded the interview between Arthur and the researcher. The interviewer learned that Arthur Hull was more than just a teacher of drumming, traditional music, and the spirit of rhythm. Hull was an energetic man, an animated speaker, a leader of drum circles in Santa Cruz, California, and facilitator for various rhythmic workshops around the world. Hull lived his own truth and made it work, while imparting a sense of joy and community to the people around him. As a thunder drummer moving toward the traditional, Arthur Hull began to identify specific rhythms from phonograph records, to study traditional drumming from Africa or Cuba or Polynesia, and to recognize these original concepts from his previous rhythm experiences. (ML)

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Rhythmical Alchemy:
Village Drumming with Arthur Hull

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Arthur Hull is an energetic man, an animated speaker, a leader of drum circles in Santa Cruz, and facilitator for various rhythmic workshops around the world. I first met him when he came to do a rhythmic evening with my men's group. I had been banging on a drum for six or seven months at that time, and had even spent a day in Big Sur learning some basic rhythm patterns, But Arthur opened my senses to a new experience of rhythm, one that I've come to call rhythmical alchemy, which happens in traditional drum circles.

A few months after that evening I started in the "Beginning beginners" class on Sunday afternoons with Arthur. These Sunday circles on the beach, in which anywhere from ten to thirty drummers of varying experience come together and learn to weave rhythmic patterns into moving creations, have become an institution in our community. There are four groups—Advanced beginners, beginner 3s, beginner 2s, and Beginning beginners—starting in the morning. Each group segues into the next, as the new players join into the circle on its final song, then give way to the next group. When the songs are cooking, the passersby line the cliffs above, dancing and swaying, trancing out to the beat.

Rhythmical Alchemy. It's what happens inside the circle, as each player holds onto a specific pattern and lets that pattern blend with several others to complete the larger pattern that we call a song. Something magical and transformative takes place when the rhythms become syncopated, something that envelopes the entire group, something that feels spiritual.

And Arthur is more than just a teacher of drumming, more than a teacher of traditional music, more than a teacher of the spirit of rhythm. The man is living his own truth and making it work, while imparting a sense of joy and community to the people around him. In addition to leading the drum classes in Santa Cruz, Arthur does a lot of "Rhythm Playday" workshops with groups ranging from executives in Silicon Valley to hearing impaired children to Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) training sessions. The common element is the sense of community that is conveyed in the rhythmic interaction of the participants. Arthur's spirit, his ability to engage and amuse his audience, and his deeply seated sense of purpose help him get his message across.

When I started doing the research for my Master's Thesis in Psychology—on the connection between rhythm circles and psychotherapeutic process—I knew that I had to interview Arthur, a man who had been experiencing and preaching the healing power of rhythm for many years. My greatest fear was how to pin him down for more than a few minutes—he doesn't stand still for long, folks—and get him to talk about what he sees, hears, feels, knows. Much to my surprise, our get-together turned into a marathon interview session, and Arthur started to articulate his philosophy, his vision, and his sense of the joy of rhythm.

This article contains portions of that interview, which is now being expanded into a book that will describe some of the techniques as well as the process of drumming with village spirit.

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Gary: Many of us have heard about the hippie thunder drummers. And a lot of us have been to men's gatherings where we beat wildly on the drum. There's something similar, yet very different that goes on in your "traditional" circles.

Arthur: Thunder drummers see a traditional drum circle like a wild horse sees a corral.

And I was a master thunder drummer. I came from the thunder drummer world. I was in those circles and pounded my hands bloody until I built up the calluses that you need to be a good thunder drummer. The calluses covered my whole hands, and I kept those calluses because I thought they were just the tools of the drummer. You hit harder, longer, faster, and you hang in there. And that was the attitude. Now I know that calluses are just a way that your body is protecting you from yourself. I've replaced my calluses with technique.

But underneath it all, the spirit finally comes through. And we all get to that place whether we recognize that that's the place you want to get to or not; well, we're all being played together. The big octopus. And it may take you an hour to get to that place where finally the trance hits everybody and we're all in the same groove. We may not all be playing the same rhythm, but we're all in the same place, together; that's where the magic is. When we're all special and together. Now, when that happens, it's like WOW!

Gary: And in the more traditionally oriented circles, like our circles on the beach on Sundays?

Arthur: Well, if you take a bunch of people who have studied traditional drumming, and say ok, we're gonna open this up to a jam, we're gonna thunder drum. We're just gonna let that happen. But all of a sudden, they're bringing an attitude into the circle, where we all want to be there together. And so, we study rhythms as formulas for getting there. When everybody is listening to everybody, everybody understands how the melody line fits in to the pitch of the drum that they're playing, and certain basic principles about listening to each other, becoming a part of something that's bigger than you are.

So, traditional drumming is going to that place that thunder drummers take an hour to get there; traditional drumming is going to that place, now, BOOM! And then, and when you're there, the spirit is there, all there, the magic is there, and it stays there. Because we all have different agreements, non-verbal agreements about how things are going to happen and how we listen to and become a part of this. And you all of a sudden surrender to the need of the whole group. You think, they don't have a bottom part here, they need more of that, Boom! All of a sudden you're only playing bottom, booms, but all of that boom becomes a lot more important than the more intricate pieces and all that fast stuff.

Gary: And how do you facilitate that in your role?

Arthur: In some situations, as a drum facilitator, my job is to take the best drummers, the hotshot dudes, the guys that can really hang, and put them on the bottom, and they know why, and they're happy to be there, and they will hold up the whole thing up from the bottom with their drumming and their willingness to be there for the group. So one hundred people end up making beautiful drumming music instead of a lot of noise, yet they are all in the same place doing their own thing, at the same "time."

Gary: Tell me about what happens when you do a group-building rhythm workshop for management people.

Arthur: I'll walk into a management training program, and use my drum circles as a metaphor for team-building. And so these facilitators have specific reasons for me to be there, and what they want me to do for them is define, in metaphoric terms, all the basic different textbook elements of what they define as team-building.

They'll use me sometimes to give these people this vision, this metaphor that they can take back into their workspace. Or they'll use me to actually create a learning team so that it's easier for them to facilitate the rest of their program. Because these people all learning together, rather than trying to learn separately, are going to give the facilitators more of what they want.

Gary: But they don't know what it is that you do; they just know that you do something

Arthur: Right. They know that I'm successful. And they see by my outreach package, and by my video, they see me facilitating 150 people at once, who started out as rhythm dorks, at the beginning of a program that lasts an hour and a half, and ends up as a full-scale, powerful experience of village drumming together. Now, how do I do that?

First of all, I in no way try to teach them anything on the surface. Because the minute that I say I'm going to teach them something, they're going to try to learn it, which gets in the way of them doing it. So what I do is I start them out and say we're gonna do a rhythm reality check.

I give them sticks, and I have them make a movement with the sticks. And then I put them off with partners, and all of a sudden the movement that they do is a dance, a stick dance. Now I have them move partners and bodies around as they do that; add little elements of this and that. Within a short time they're doing Sufi dance while doing Indian stick dancing while doing a complicated Haitian Bolero rhythm with their hands and their sticks, with each other, while spinning and changing partners, all at the same time, and they end up on the other side of the circle, meeting their partner again.

Gary: And if they knew what they were doing, they would never do it.

Arthur: No way would they do it. They would be stuck "trying" to "learn" the first two of the six parts of the dance. After they get done and they have a success. Then I tell them all of the different things that they've done just to let them know that that's how they're going to learn from me, just to be open to the experience, what I'm giving them, for the rest of the program.

Basically, if you can sing it, you can play it. So I have them sing back and forth the parts to each other and the basic metaphor that I use is that they are a village, it doesn't matter what kind of village; if could be African, it could be Balinesian, it doesn't matter. It is the sense of village. Then I define what a village is, I give them a definition of my village.

A village is a living, breathing entity social, economic, and spiritual entity that is interdependent upon all of the parts of itself to make itself healthy, wealthy and wise.

Gary: It's a thing that is composed of parts, and has a process of its own.

Arthur: Right. And then what I say is that everyone has a role to play in the village to make it that way, and there's a chief, and there are midwives, and I point out people. And there's harvesters and planters, there's the child raisers, the wise old sage, and there's a trouble-maker. There's always a trouble-maker, the distractor.

I try to represent and form that village consciousness within the group. Without saying, ok, you're Congolese, and this is how the Congolese do it. I have no intention of representing any specific ethnic group, but use the basic elements that make up any village to create in their minds a sense of Village Consciousness that applies to the culture and environment that they live and work in.

Because every village and culture does it differently, but generally speaking there are these kinds of villages all around the world, where they all come together to celebrate the village by playing music together. And they play together like they work together. Everyone has parts to play, and every part is no more and no less important than any other. And when all the parts are working together in harmony, there is a song.

And I deliberately try not to teach them anything, but let them experience the concepts in action. That's important, so we can create the song as an auditory representation of the group vision.

Gary: How did you find your way into what you call traditional drumming?

Arthur: I actually got into traditional drumming like Mickey Hart and many other drummers. I'd been listening to Ọlatunjii and Drums of Passion. As a thunder drummer going toward traditional, I started picking up specific rhythms off of records and

touching bases with this person and that person, but not necessarily surrendering to a teacher at that time.

And as I began to study traditional drumming from Africa or Cuba or Polynesia—it doesn't matter. I started to realize that all this original stuff that I'd discovered inside all my rhythm experiences as a thunder drummer and as a trap drummer was as old as the hills.

Gary: So you're aware of the connection of trap drumming to traditional drumming?

Arthur: I wasn't until I got deeply involved with traditional drumming to where I realized that trap drumming was just a way for one person to try to be the whole village—the bass, the snare, the toms, the tambours, and basically that attitude is how trap drumming evolved, really.

Gary: And the term traditional?

Arthur: Out of due respect, I don't say that I'm an African drummer by any means. And when I teach, my objective is to use African rhythms as models to take people to my teachers. And I've been very successful at that. Most of the drummers in this particular community who are now working with and supporting people of source have come through me first. That's my mission, to bring to them the sense of spirit; and later on, as they get better and better, the sense of responsibility to the source of where the rhythms come from, out of due respect.

Gary: I'm thinking of Joseph Campbell - he assimilated myths from all over the world. He saw this common thread. And what I hear you saying is the same thing about rhythm. They go around the world. Some people think this is it, but it's really the same thing in a different guise.

Arthur: Right. I in no way, even though I use and play with African rhythms as models to bring my students into the rhythmical world, I in no way come to represent any culture. I want my students to have a choice, so I take them to a place where they can look around and understand there's a difference between Afro-Cuban drumming and Congolese drumming and West African Senegalese drumming and all the different myriad kinds of drums, drumming styles, and teachers that are available.

But there are certain essences that run through the rhythmical world. And for a beginning beginner I give them this essence, somewhere between the highly technical world of the traditional drum fanatic and the highly non-specific world of the spirit drummer. I stand in the middle. I stand in the middle because I know that you've got to find your own spirit in your own rhythm, and at the same time, to go to and experience the other styles and drums and drum rhythms from different cultures. It's like taking a world tour in drum rhythm land, and it is enlightening.

Gary: It widens the container.

Arthur: Definitely. And to have the basic building blocks of rhythm and take it into a whole new drumming situation lets you access what a teacher is giving you. And you can access it almost immediately. Because the drums are different in every culture, the style and technique are also different; but if you have the basic building block foundation, you can walk into a drum situation where a lot of African drummers throw the whole thing at you at once, and get what you get out of it.

So I make sure that a person learns a rhythm first before I hand them a piece of paper with the rhythm written on it. I'll hand them the piece of paper and tell them, This is just a map. The map is not the territory. And the way the building blocks are written on the map, and this is the problem with Western drumming or any notation, and that's why a lot of African teachers do not write their stuff down; it's the traditional oral tradition. And an upbeat taught by a Congolese drummer looks just like an upbeat taught by a Senegalese drummer when written down, but they are played differently, feel different, and have different effects.

Gary: You impress me as having a strong sense of mission.

Arthur: Yeah. I know what my mission is. It is many-faceted and complicated on some level, and very simple on another level. And it's little Arthur rhythm seeds.

Now, because I've studied eclectically, and because I've surrendered to all these different teachers for certain periods of time, and studied rhythms from many different aspects, from rock 'n roll to African to American Indian to shamanistic drumming to New Age—finding the rhythms of people. It's little Arthur rhythm seeds, and it's all about turning people on, helping them find the rhythm inside themselves, and the drummer that's inside themselves.

Gary: And when you lead management training or personal growth programs?

Arthur: The first objective, of course, is to break down the physiology of the corporate hierarchy, in their bodies, so they can actually take a look around and see that it is not the vice president they're standing next to, or their lowly secretary, but people who are there to share something of a common, in common.

Gary: We're all just bozos on this bus.

Arthur: Literally. And the work is easier for me in personal growth programs because people walk in and they already have "this culture." Show me, give me, show me something, WOW, I'm ready to experience and explore.

Now the corporate structure is a little different. I have to take them down to that place where the camaraderie starts to happen. And it's easy enough. I get them a little sweaty and breathing and make them sing, and all of a sudden they're coming out of left field, and they end up drumming, and they don't even know about it.

Gary: Drumming as a way to find connection.

Arthur: Rhythm has been a part of my life all of my life, and I've served it for over thirty years, and now it serves me back, feeds my family and my spirit, and that relationship started a long time before I heard the word Africa.

Drums are everywhere, and there's a certain communion that happens all over the world that belongs to us as human beings that need to be in touch with each other and in touch with the Spirit of Rhythm. That we all manifest.

It's like, you can take it another step, touch your heart, feel the rhythm, there it is. You're not African, you're not Polynesian, you're just who you are. If you are human and on this planet, then the rhythm is inside of you. The heartbeat is the most obvious, organic rhythm that there is. And there are a lot of those kinds of rhythms running inside your body constantly; if they weren't there, you wouldn't be here.

But that particular rhythm doesn't belong to you. Because it's inside your body, pumping away. Guess what, that rhythm was pumping inside your body when your body was inside your mother. So that rhythm came from your mother, but of course, your mother's rhythm came from her mother, and her grandmother, and her mother. So we end up taking that rhythm all the way back to Africa if you want to take it that far back. To the first humanoid that swung out of the trees in Central Africa that started civilization. As Gabrielle Roth [author of Maps to Ecstasy] says, "That heartbeat goes all the way back to zero."

Gary: And it's always evolving.

Arthur: It's packaged differently, in different rhythms from different cultures, but remember that those rhythms are part of the cultures, and in fact, you can't drum unless you sing, you can't sing unless you dance, you can't dance unless you drum. And of course, the western culture wants to divide these three things into parts, so you have drum classes, you have dance classes, and you have singing classes.

And I prepare my students by making it mandatory that they go and participate at least twice in each quarter with source people and experience. See, they come to learn how to drum. They have to at least go and experience one of the ethnic arts dance classes so that they can see that the drummer makes the dancer dance, or is it the dancer makes the drummer drum? Which comes first?

Neither one—they are aspects of the same. They are in a way parts of a trilogy that is part of a whole. Communication through rhythm belongs to us all.

Gary: I find myself wondering about what you do with the power that you must feel when you're leading a workshop or teaching a circle. When people put you up on a pedestal.

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Arthur: I use those false images. Why not use it if your objective is to use anything and everything you can to get them to a place of healing and oneness with each other. So I surrender myself to whatever is available, whatever tools I have, and whatever environment I'm in to make that happen. It doesn't matter if it's a group of kindergarten kids, a group of serious drumming students, or a group of executive people, or a group of New Age consciousness people. Everyone has a different reason to be there

And I get to the point where I'm no longer facilitating that and at the end of an hour and a half program with business executives I know I've achieved my objective. Because I can walk away from that circle and it's going and it sustains itself, and everybody is there and the spirit is in the room, and I've slowly but surely given the power that they'd given me, thinking I'm the powerful one, back to the group and to them as individuals. Because only they have the power to bring Spirit into the room.

Gary: Rhythmical Alchemy.

Arthur: Rhythmical Alchemy. But it's the group. I don't have the power to bring the spirit into the circle. And without the spirit there, everyone's there as an individual, and they get back only what they give. But if they are giving up their power to the One, then the One they become, and they become a One that is all encompassing and affects them beyond the rhythms that they're playing, beyond the circle that they're in, deep into their lives and their subconsciousness.

So when they walk away, it's not like they're good American consumers and they're bitten a chunk of rhythm from Arthur, and walked away with a good experience. They walk away carrying something that they gave away to me that I gave back to them that they can keep and have access to. And they can take that, because it's the power of understanding the normal everyday life that they're living has rhythms has the beauty and the mystery of rhythm in how they eat, the rhythm of how they stuff their faces is something beautiful. And to wake them up.

Gary: You don't have to go to a monastery to experience spirit.

Arthur: And you don't have to learn Congolese drumming to drum. And just because you happen to be a white and come from the middle of the United States, and never had any kind of drumming experience or rhythm experience in you life doesn't mean the experiences aren't there for you to get, and doesn't mean you're not allowed to drum. Because spirit is a birthright. And rhythm is in you.

Gary: It's a river you can swim in.

Arthur: And so it feeds me and my family, and it's like breathing. If I had to stop drumming—I tried a few times to become financially successful doing something else,to "make it in the world"—I don't know if I could live. I'm just serving and feeding it, and it tells me how I can best serve it and work in the world. And guess what, it goes everywhere.

I find myself in the middle of 30 deaf children, and I'm supposed to teach them how to drum, I'm supposed to teach them drumming. I'm supposed to give them a rhythm experience, and through my interpreter who speaks to them with her hands, my spirt, I surrender to this mission, says "Oh, your body is your ears, let your body feel the rhythm." Then I teach them the rhythms by playing it for them, and letting them watch my hands and feeling the rhythm. Rhythm is a physical, kinesthetic experience, it's not what you hear. And so I taught those kids, deaf kids, and they learned the exact same rhythms that my beginning beginners know. That the executives learn. And were able to learn in their bodies and reproduce those rhythms on the drums in such a way that one group of kids was playing one part of the rhythm, and the other group was playing the other part, and they were totally in sync. No ears, just eyes, spirit.

Gary: Amazing.

Arthur: The subtleties inside this. I keep getting presented opportunities that are unique and beautiful. That are totally on my path. And it's not like I point, it's like the rhythm is encompassing and it is my compass. And it keeps presenting me with beautiful opportunities that are above and beyond traditional drum circle energy. And yet, I'm creating a situation now, where I'm teaching because I want to, I'm

teaching drum circles because I want to, not because I have to.

Gary: It lets you be a lot more creative.

Arthur: And by serving the mission that defines my life, it keeps giving me these wonderful opportunities to keep growing as a teacher and as a facilitator, and as a channel for the Spirit.

But it doesn't necessarily mean that someone has to rip their life apart in order to surrender to going and drumming and rhythm. Because rhythm in itself exists in everyone's life, and makes everyone's life a joy to be. Finding it in the grain in the wood in the chair that you sat in for years. Discovering those special things that have always existed in your mundane life makes your life not mundane anymore. And it's discovering things about you, the rhythm that you are and have always been, but not noticed.

Gary: A different way of hearing the world.

Arthur: Hearing the world, feeling the world. And seeing the world. They're all there. Just take a good look—you know, "stop and smell the roses." Stop and look at a plant and follow it from the ground all the way to the top of the plant. It doesn't have to be a fancy, exotic plant, it could be a little dorky plant, and you look at nature's rhythm—it's in how the leaves come out, the pattern of how the leaves come off the stem and the pattern that gets in the veins. Just stop to smell the plant. Stop and look at the world through your child's eyes, and the rhythm in it will astound you into the Ah of your innocence.